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ABSTRACT

In order to determine the attitudes of foreign students toward the U.S., a questionnaire was issued to students from Asia, Western Europe, Africa, Japan and the Philippines, Latin America and other countries. Questions concerned Americans' attitudes, American food, religion in the U.S., money in the U.S., job equality, automobile dependency, U.S. newspapers, the U.S. education system, U.S. products, materialism in the U.S., the family unit, and desires to become U.S. citizens. It was found that age made a greater difference in foreign student attitude toward the U.S. than did length of residence in the U.S., geographic origin, or sex. Older respondents generally held a more positive attitude toward the U.S. than did their younger counterparts. (HS)

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Foreign Student Perceptions of the United States

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Indiana Studies in Prediction No. 20

FOREIGN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

by

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Bureau of Educational Studies and Testing
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Bloomington, Indiana
1972

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FOREIGN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS
OF THE UNITED STATES

Introduction to the Problem

Next year several thousand foreigners will come to the United States to study at our universities and colleges. While here, these students will serve as information pipelines to many countries around the world, and later, upon their return, they will speak with authority about the United States. Their observations, quite naturally, will be critical as well as favorable and more astute than most of us realize. Probably 90 percent of the foreign students already hold degrees and most of them speak English. More importantly, they view us with eyes unjaundiced by our value system. The writings of Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America attest to the astounding potential in such foreign observations. Beyond the simple human sense in which we care what others think of us, foreign perception in the U. S. has economic, political, and military implications. Do the Russians perceive us as militarily superior? How do the North Vietnamese interpret the effect of the coming election on the war? To what extent is the stock market influenced by foreign confidence in the dollar? In short, foreign perception of the United States provides us not only with

insight about ourselves but also has direct practical consequences on our national economy and policies. Given the accuracy of these observations, it appears strange that opinions of a population as accessible as the foreign students in this country have been relatively ignored in the past few years.

This study is intended to gauge the sentiment of foreigners toward the U.S. and to investigate some popular stereotypes concerning those who come to this country. Namely, do most foreigners who come here want to stay and become citizens? How does residence affect their attitude towards the U.S.? Do they conclude, perhaps due to recent student protests, that people in this country do not support their government? Do they see us as materialists who show little concern for a stable family life?

Procedure

The study began by drawing a sample of 100 subjects, 65 males and 35 females, from the more than 500 foreign students enrolled at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University. A questionnaire and explanatory letter were mailed to these students. Seventy-seven questionnaires were returned. Sixty-four percent came from males. The geographic origins of the respondents were Western Europe

and Canada, 23%; Japan and the Philippines, 10%; Asia, 29%; Latin America, 10%; Africa, 13%; and others, 15%. The complete questionnaire and answers given by subjects classified according to geographic origins are given in Table 1. The reader is cautioned not to make much of small differences between geographic groups due to the relatively small sub-sample sizes.

Results

Both anticipated and inexplicable regional differences were highlighted by the questionnaire. For example, we have recently heard reference to the Japanese industriousness and how it helps account for the growth of the Japanese economy. Item 6 provides some indirect support for this notion. The Japanese-Philippino group was the only one of which less than 50 percent agreed that people in the U.S. work hard.

Africans and Latin Americans united with each other and stood apart from other regions in at least two ways. First, they perceived the U.S. as relatively more willing to help other countries (item 2). This attitude could stem from the highly publicized foreign aid allotted to underdeveloped countries. Secondly, these two groups were rather extreme in perceiving U.S. citizens as supportive of their government (item 4). Perhaps this latter

Table 1. Subject Responses Classified According to Geographic Origins

	Percentage Selecting Each Response			
	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	No Answer
1. People in the U. S. are friendly.				
Asia	87	9	2	2
Western Europe	83	6	0	11
Africa	70	0	10	20
Japan and Philippines	63	12	13	12
Latin America	71	0	14	15
Other	50	33	17	0
Total Sample	72	10	8	10
2. People in the U. S. want to help other countries.				
Asia	22	61	15	2
Western Europe	50	17	33	0
Africa	70	10	20	0
Japan and Philippines	38	50	12	0
Latin America	57	14	14	15
Other	42	33	25	0
Total Sample	42	35	20	3
3. I like the food in the U. S.				
Asia	30	15	55	0
Western Europe	44	19	39	0
Africa	30	30	40	0
Japan and Philippines	63	13	24	0
Latin America	28	29	43	0
Other	42	16	42	0
Total Sample	37	18	45	0
4. People in the U. S. support their government.				
Asia	30	52	18	0
Western Europe	23	44	33	0
Africa	80	20	0	0
Japan and Philippines	62	38	0	0
Latin America	86	14	0	0
Other	50	25	25	0
Total Sample	46	37	17	0

Table 1, Continued

	Percentage Selecting Each Response			
	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	No Answer
5. People in the U. S. are not interested in other languages.				
Asia	30	30	40	0
Western Europe	39	39	12	0
Africa	50	10	40	0
Japan and Philippines	50	38	12	0
Latin America	28	14	43	15
Other	42	42	16	0
Total Sample	39	29	30	2
6. People in the U. S. work hard.				
Asia	70	18	9	3
Western Europe	94	6	0	0
Africa	70	0	30	0
Japan and Philippines	38	38	24	0
Latin America	100	0	0	0
Other	92	0	8	0
Total Sample	77	11	11	1
7. People in the U. S. have too much money.				
Asia	26	43	22	9
Western Europe	33	55	12	0
Africa	60	30	10	0
Japan and Philippines	13	63	24	0
Latin America	43	43	0	14
Other	42	33	25	0
Total Sample	35	35	26	4
8. Religion in the U. S. is very important.				
Asia	34	26	40	0
Western Europe	39	11	50	0
Africa	50	10	40	0
Japan and Philippines	13	63	24	0
Latin America	57	28	15	0
Other	50	42	8	0
Total Sample	40	26	34	0
9. All people have equal opportunities in the U. S.				
Asia	26	40	34	0
Western Europe	11	28	61	0
Africa	30	20	50	0
Japan and Philippines	13	24	63	0
Latin America	14	43	43	0
Other	33	33	33	0
Total Sample	21	32	47	0

Table 1, continued

	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	No Answer
10. People are very dependent on the auto in the U. S.				
Asia	96	0	4	0
Western Europe	100	0	0	0
Africa	100	0	0	0
Japan and Philippines	100	0	0	0
Latin America	71	0	29	0
Other	100	0	0	0
Total Sample	95	0	5	0
11. U. S. newspapers cover all sides of an issue.				
Asia	43	22	35	0
Western Europe	33	17	50	0
Africa	30	10	60	0
Japan and Philippines	38	24	38	0
Latin America	28	43	29	0
Other	25	40	35	0
Total Sample	34	24	42	0
12. I would like to become a U. S. citizen.				
Asia	13	35	52	0
Western Europe	0	44	50	6
Africa	10	20	70	0
Japan and Philippines	0	24	76	0
Latin America	28	29	43	0
Other	0	33	58	9
Total Sample	6	33	57	4
13. The education system in the U. S. is very good.				
Asia	52	30	18	0
Western Europe	50	17	33	0
Africa	60	30	10	0
Japan and Philippines	63	24	13	0
Latin America	57	15	28	0
Other	83	0	17	0
Total Sample	62	17	21	0
14. U. S. citizens are clean and modern.				
Asia	40	40	18	2
Western Europe	78	17	5	0
Africa	70	0	30	0
Japan and Philippines	13	63	24	0
Latin America	43	28	29	0
Other	83	8	9	0
Total Sample	55	24	21	0

Table 1, continued

		Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	No Answer
15.	U. S. women are good mothers.				
	Asia	22	70	8	0
	Western Europe	22	66	12	0
	Africa	50	30	20	0
	Japan and Philippines	12	38	50	0
	Latin America	29	57	14	0
	Other	42	33	25	0
	Total Sample	27	54	19	0
16.	I would like to raise my children in the U. S.				
	Asia	22	9	65	4
	Western Europe	22	39	39	0
	Africa	20	20	60	0
	Japan and Philippines	13	24	63	0
	Latin America	28	29	43	0
	Other	17	50	33	0
	Total Sample	17	28	54	1
17.	U. S. people know my country better than my people know the U. S.				
	Asia	0	0	100	0
	Western Europe	0	6	94	0
	Africa	30	0	70	0
	Japan and Philippines	0	24	76	0
	Latin America	0	14	86	0
	Other	17	0	83	0
	Total Sample	6	3	91	0
18.	Products made in the U. S. are very high quality.				
	Asia	52	22	26	0
	Western Europe	33	17	50	0
	Africa	50	10	40	0
	Japan and Philippines	24	38	38	0
	Latin America	57	29	14	0
	Other	58	25	17	0
	Total Sample	45	22	33	0
19.	People in the U. S. talk a lot.				
	Asia	70	30	0	0
	Western Europe	66	28	6	0
	Africa	50	40	0	10
	Japan and Philippines	50	38	12	0
	Latin America	14	29	57	0
	Other	42	42	16	0
	Total Sample	56	32	10	2

Table 1, continued

	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	No Answer
20. Men in the U. S. dominate their families.				
Asia	26	52	22	0
Western Europe	28	33	39	0
Africa	10	50	40	0
Japan and Philippines	0	100	0	0
Latin America	0	57	43	0
Other	17	33	42	8
Total Sample	18	49	32	1
21. I prefer a family with four or more children.				
Asia	9	9	82	0
Western Europe	17	17	66	0
Africa	20	20	50	10
Japan and Philippines	24	38	38	0
Latin America	0	0	100	0
Other	0	17	83	0
Total Sample	12	15	71	2
22. People from the U. S. are very materialistic.				
Asia	61	26	8	5
Western Europe	72	28	0	0
Africa	80	10	10	0
Japan and Philippines	76	24	0	0
Latin America	71	0	29	0
Other	58	42	0	0
Total Sample	68	22	9	1
23. My ideas about the U. S. have changed since I've been here.				
Asia	65	13	22	0
Western Europe	72	6	22	0
Africa	70	0	20	10
Japan and Philippines	76	12	12	0
Latin America	57	14	29	0
Other	66	9	25	0
Total Sample	69	9	20	2

attitude is molded by the contrast between this country and their own where coup d'etats and rapid turnover in the upper echelons of government are commonplace.

Only the Africans evidenced a strong tendency (60%) to conclude that people in the U.S. have too much money (item 7). It remains to be determined why this is so. There are certainly many contrasting impoverished regions in Africa, but the same is true for Asia and Latin America.

Latin Americans were especially unique in their attitudes toward the U.S.; however, the reasons for this phenomenon are difficult to ascertain. They alone deviate from near unanimity in perceiving people in the U.S. to be dependent on the automobile (item 10); 100% see us as hard workers (item 6); they are more likely to want to become citizens than are people from any other region (item 12), and they alone do not feel that people in the U.S. talk a great deal (item 19).

Items thought to reflect a favorable attitude toward the U.S. were scored separately and a "favorableness" score was derived for each student. One might expect the student who achieved high grades to be positively reinforced and consequently hold a positive attitude toward the U.S. This expectation was not born out since the favorableness scores were negatively

related to grade-point average at Indiana University ($r=-.21$, $p<.05$). Such a relationship between attitude and GPA may result from students with less favorable attitudes remaining at home to study, since greater immersion in the culture is not as inviting to them as it is to the more favorably disposed students. On the other hand, the more studious individuals may merely have had too little time to develop friendships with Americans; thus, they would be less likely to hold a favorable attitude toward the U.S. In any case the negative relationship is a surprising one.

An attempt was made to match each person with another of the same country, sex, and class standing, but who differed in amount of time spent in this country. They were selected so that one person per pair had been here less than three months while the second had been here over two years. This selection procedure made it possible to draw certain inferences about attitude change while in the U.S. Twenty percent of the sample could not be matched using this procedure. Few differences were found between recent arrivals and those who had been here two years or more. The two-year group seemed to have decided that people in the U.S. are indeed quite materialistic, that they are dependent on the automobile, and that women here are not very good mothers. These

observations, however, may be factual instead of attitudinal.

Surprisingly, age seemed to make a much greater difference in foreign student attitude toward the U.S. than did length of residence in the U.S., geographic origin, or sex. An item by item examination of student responses revealed no difference between males and females. Older students (i.e., those above the median age of 25) did generally hold a more positive attitude ($p<.05$) toward the U.S. than did their younger conterparts. More specifically the older respondents hold a more favorable opinion of the U.S. educational system, U.S. mothers, and U.S. newspaper coverage. They are also (a) more inclined to view the U.S. as a land of equal opportunity for all, (b) more favorable toward becoming U.S. citizens, (c) more likely to concede that U.S. citizens are hard workers, (d) more convinced that U.S. products are high in quality, and (e) more inclined to believe that the U.S. wants to help other countries. Indeed, it appears that foreigners are clearly similar to people in this country in one important respect--older individuals are more satisfied with the status quo.

The Components of Opinions

In order to ferret out the dimensions of foreign perception of the U.S., a factor analysis of the questionnaire data and the coded data concerning age, marital status, sex, and time in the U.S. was conducted (Table 2). Ten factors with eigenvalues greater than one resulted. Tentative interpretation is attempted below. These factors represent independent (orthogonal) dimensions along which the foreigners tested tended to view our society. A score can be provided for each respondent on each factor.

The production, happiness, democratic factor reflects the extent to which foreigners see U.S. citizens as productive, sharing opportunities, enjoying uncensored news coverage, and knowledgeable about other countries.

The culinary factor shows the extent to which foreigners are favorably impressed by American food. As one might anticipate, appreciation of American food is closely linked to the geographic origin of the student. Taste for the food here is shown to be related to marital status. Presumably married students have a greater tendency to prepare their own food and hence do not experience such a complete switch to American food upon arrival as do single students who eat in the dormitory or in restaurants.

Table 2. Factor Analysis of Questionnaire Data

	Factors									
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
1. Age	09	11	-18	07	-80	12	-02	04	05	-22
2. Sex 1=male 2=female	-06	47	57	03	23	17	-22	11	17	03
3. Marital status 1=married 2=single	02	-12	-02	12	79	08	14	-01	-02	-17
4. Time in U. S. (in months)	-03	05	03	-01	-01	08	86	09	-02	02
5. Geographic origin (see text)	01	54	-08	-36	-09	51	16	-11	04	-11
6. People in the U. S. are friendly.	22	-03	-44	41	05	-13	12	-30	-11	21
7. People in the U. S. want to help other countries.	25	18	-39	41	-32	-23	09	-28	-20	11
8. I like the food in the U. S.	10	82	-23	11	-15	-19	09	05	-07	02
9. People in the U. S. support their government.	23	-26	-02	04	-55	00	27	05	16	-05
10. People in the U. S. are not interested in other languages.	-09	11	01	-09	-04	-86	-02	05	-06	00
11. People in the U. S. work hard.	14	06	-78	-02	-03	06	-12	11	01	-07
12. People in the U. S. have too much money.	27	31	-06	-13	-17	05	-04	-59	25	06
13. Religion in the U. S. is very important.	13	-10	-09	05	-07	-02	22	06	80	05

Table 2, continued

		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
14.	All people have equal opportunities in the U. S.	67	-08	-16	18	-07	10	-06	16	21	-14
15.	People are very dependent on the auto in the U. S.	-38	-05	-06	-08	-16	-13	25	09	11	63
16.	U. S. newspapers cover all sides of an issue.	60	07	04	24	-19	39	-05	-12	-04	15
17.	I would like to become a U. S. citizen.	-04	-07	-11	84	01	16	-03	07	06	-16
18.	The education system in the U. S. is very good.	43	-01	-42	-08	-19	17	05	51	16	-09
19.	U. S. citizens are clean and modern.	-12	25	-73	20	-07	06	05	01	22	-02
20.	U. S. women are good mothers.	23	19	-50	18	-14	-25	-30	21	37	-17
21.	I would like to raise my children in the U. S.	32	10	-19	58	-07	-02	-08	28	30	01
22.	U. S. people know my country better than my people know U. S.	46	20	-04	15	-34	00	09	-14	09	-01
23.	Products made in the U. S. are very high quality.	82	01	-12	-08	-01	-13	02	-01	09	-12
24.	People in the U. S. talk a lot.	-05	18	18	-15	18	00	-07	-25	-18	68
25.	Men in the U. S. dominate their families.	-10	-14	08	-11	09	11	-07	-78	-01	01
26.	I prefer a family with four or more children.	-02	-30	-01	02	-03	24	-50	06	-10	59

Table 2, continued

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
27. People from the U. S. are very materialistic.	-36	-04	-13	-41	-07	02	01	-16	08	18
28. My ideas about the U. S. have changed since I've been here.	-06	-06	03	02	03	-08	22	12	-73	

The protestant ethic factor demonstrates the extent to which Americans are perceived as clean, modern, good mothers, and hard workers.

The patriotism factor is a measure of the desire to become U.S. citizens and raise their children here. Those who adopt this attitude also view the people of the U.S. as friendly, inclined to help other countries, and not very materialistic.

The age-sex factor is bipolar and reveals that the older students who come to study in the U.S. are mainly males.

The language factor serves as an index of the extent to which people in the U.S. are perceived as interested in other languages.

The time-population factor shows, as indicated above, that time spent in this country does not drastically affect attitudes as measured by the questionnaire. Foreigners keep the opinion they come with, except with time they evidence less interest in a large family.

The social equality factor mirrors the extent to which men are seen as dominant and all people have equal opportunities. It may also indicate the degree to which money is seen to be equitably distributed.

The religion and self-perception factor is perhaps the most difficult factor to interpret. A high positive

score shows both the extent to which people in the U.S. were perceived as religious and the extent to which the foreign student perceived a change in himself due to living here. It is perplexing that these items should vary together.

The gregarious and mobility factor may indicate a perception of U.S. citizens as gregarious and mobile to the extent that loss of the auto would change the way of life.

The questionnaire data provide information pertinent to the popular stereotypes of foreigners. Do most foreign students who come here want to stay and become citizens? Apparently not. Only six percent of the foreign students tested wished to become U.S. citizens, although 33% were uncertain. In general, the majority of foreign students opposed adoption of U.S. citizenship.

How does residence here affect their attitude toward this country? As a group they probably do not become more positive or negative toward the U.S. during their first two years of residence. At least we did not find the two-year group to be more or less positive than those who arrived during the past three months.

Do they infer, perhaps due to recent student protests, that people in the U.S. do not support their government? No. They seem divided on the issue. Older

foreign students perceive us as more supportive of government than do the younger ones.

Finally, do foreigners see us as materialists with scant concern for a stable family life? Yes and no. Younger students see us as quite materialistic and judge U.S. women to be poor mothers. Older students disagree.

If we can agree that motherhood and anti-materialism are good, then the attitudinal difference between the young and the old is in keeping with the relative overall "favorableness" of the older foreign students.

Summary

Several general conclusions may be drawn from this initial investigation of foreign student perception of the United States. (1) The most deviate group of foreigners was found to be the Latin Americans who differed in several ways from all other subject groups tested. (2) According to this study the attitudes of Latin Americans as well as all other represented foreigners are not unidimensional nor are they easily changed. (3) Foreign perception of the U.S. appears to be more a function of background and age than it is of the first two years experience in this country.